A younger Richard M. Daley, former mayor, marching with friends.

The Return of the ‘Hamburgs’? White Vigilantes, the Chicago Police, and Anti-Fascism in Chicago

by Joe Allen

June 19, 2020

Chicago has seen some of the largest and most militant demonstrations in the United States during the weeks following the murder of George Floyd. Thirty thousand people marched and rallied on June 6 in Union Park, for example. While demonstrators have suffered repeated acts of violence by the Chicago Police Department and seen their constitutional rights trampled on by Mayor Lori Lightfoot, others were menaced by self-appointed “neighborhood protectors.”

The most disturbing example of this was on the night of June 3, when a gang of mostly white men wielding baseball bats harassed African-Americans and anti-racist activists in the Southside neighborhood of Bridgeport. It appeared

that white racist vigilantism had returned to the streets of Chicago. *Block Club Chicago*, a very reliable local media site, reported:

On Wednesday night [June 3] in Bridgeport, while there were no reports of physical assaults by the self-appointed guardians at 31st Street and Princeton Avenue, but several people say they were illegally harassed and intimidated by men with weapons while the Chicago Police did nothing about it.

Earlier in the evening, Whitney Rosier, who lives in Bridgeport along with her husband, were walking east to a protest in Bronzeville, the historically Black neighborhood. Rosier told *Block Club*:

"Just so you know, my husband is Black and I am white. So, a car came up behind us but we kept walking and they stopped because it was on a street with a cul-de-sac. By the time we got to 31st and Princeton there was a massive crowd of white men, most of them had bats. Some had pipes. I've never seen anything like it. The police were there and wouldn't let us cross and this was all to stop the quote-unquote "riots" but there was nothing going on."

Later on Tanya Rosin, who was driving home through Bridgeport from the Bronzeville protest, with a Black Lives Matter sign on her car, was stop by car with flashing lights. It wasn't a cop car. Rosin said,

"Two of them got out and blocked our path forward with their bodies. One stood only a few inches away from the front of my car while screaming at us to turn around and leave and the other one stood a couple of yards away from the driver side of the car."

Rosin tried to turn her car around but was blocked by a white man in a pickup flying the Chicago flag. Chicago cops sitting nearby in a police SUV did nothing to help her. She was finally able to escape unharmed.

While no one was injured by these racist vigilantes, it was a frightening experience that could have easily led to something far more serious. Mayor Lori Lightfoot soon afterwards denounced vigilantism, along with Bridgeport alderman Patrick Daley Thompson, while the CPD denied it had cooperated with them. We should be skeptical of the CPD's claim of innocence.

In response, a proposed demonstration against racist vigilantism was called in Bridgeport but quickly called off, after several organizations pulled out. I can't speak to the merits of cancelling the demonstration, but it does appear to be a missed opportunity to confront racism in a neighborhood historically identified with violent racism. I think the appearance of racist vigilantism, however, should foster a deeper discussion of anti-fascist campaigning in Chicago, where the police have historically cooperated with the far right.

Racism in the old neighborhood

Bridgeport looms large in the history of Chicago. This small, compact Southside neighborhood produced five mayors for the city, including the infamous Richard J. Daley, Sr., and his slightly less infamous son Richard M. Daley. It was notoriously racist throughout the 20th Century. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that it was the buckle of the racist belt of white neighborhoods in Chicago.

In 1919, Bridgeport gained infamy due to the role of the Hamburg Athletic Club. The "Hamburgs," as they were known, were one of several racist Irish Catholic "athletic clubs" that carried out violent attacks on Blacks during the 1919 Race Riots in Chicago. The Hamburgs mixed anti-Black racism with political aspirations, and they might have disappeared down the memory hole, except that its most famous member was future Mayor and Democratic Party Boss Richard J. Daley.

Bridgeport was the heart of Richard J. Daley's political machine. During the height of his rule in the mid-1960s, Daley had personal veto power over 2,000 patronage jobs in a community of 38,000 people. He raised his family there, including his sons Richard M. Daley, who would become the longest serving mayor in Chicago history, as well as Bill Daley, who would become President Barak Obama's commerce secretary and chief of staff, and later in life a failed candidate for mayor.

Meanwhile, few Blacks lived in Bridgeport, despite the large Black community of Bronezville being a short walk away. Bronzeville and Bridgeport were separated by the mammoth Dan Ryan Expressway—part of federal interstate highway system—that was deliberately constructed to separate the neighborhoods. Bridgeport was considered a no-go zone for African-Americans, it was extremely dangerous to walk or drive into the neighborhood any time of day or night.

Richard J. Daley epitomized the worst instincts of the political establishment that reached deep into white, working class neighborhoods like Bridgeport. During the tumultuous year of 1968, Daley called on the police to "shoot

looters" following the nationwide rebellion in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Daley's cops mercilessly assaulted anti-war demonstrators during the Democratic convention. When Senator Abraham Ribicoff denounced the police for using "Gestapo" tactics, Daley called him an anti-Semitic slur from the convention floor.

In 1993, Richard M. Daley, Jr., then Mayor of Chicago, moved out of Bridgeport. It was the symbolic end to Bridgeport's dominance in city politics, but the Daley family never really left the old neighborhood. Patrick Daley Thompson, the grandson of Richard J. and nephew of Richard M., is the current alderman for the 11th Ward that encompasses Bridgeport. The 11th Ward Democratic committee is chaired by John Daley, another son of Richard J., and brother of Richard M. One Daley or another has chaired the 11th Ward for sixty years.

During the decades following the departure of Richard M. Daley, Bridgeport went from being virtually all-white to a more diverse neighborhood. By the late 1990's it was already forty percent Latino and Asian (mostly Chinese); but violent racism, however, persisted. Lenard Clark, an African-American teenager, who rode his bike into Bridgeport, was nearly was beaten to death by three white Bridgeport teenagers in March 1997. They bragged about keeping Blacks out of the neighborhood. One of Clark's attackers was Frank Caruso, the son of a Bridgeport Mafioso.

Today, Bridgeport is considered one of the most diverse neighborhoods in Chicago. Many younger people, including many radical activists, have also moved into the neighborhood in search of cheaper rent. However, parts of the neighborhood still have a nasty edge to them. Cops and other city workers living in Bridgeport exude a hostility to 'outsiders,' even though if you walk down Halsted street on any given day, you'd be forgiven for thinking it was a Chinese and Mexican neighborhood. But, a handful of bars also make it clear that they are for "locals only."

Chicago Police and the Far Right

I'm sure that the vigilantes were drawn from those parts of Bridgeport. I would further bet many of them are relatives or friends of Chicago cops. That shouldn't surprise anyone. The Chicago Police Department has long been a hospitable home to all sorts of racists, anti-Communists, and far right political movements. In fact, throughout much of the 20th Century, it was difficult it figure out where the CPD ended and the far right began.

Not only has the CPD regularly provided protection for the far right. According to historian Frank Donner:

“At least since the post-World War I days of the Chicago-based American Vigilance Federation, Chicago’s political police have maintained important ties with the city’s ever-blooming far right groups. Beginning in the mid-sixties, a secret tie was gradually formed between various parts of the Chicago law enforcement structure—especially the red squad—and a group known as the Legion of Justice.”

The Legion of Justice (LoJ) was formed by an ex-liberal and corporate lawyer S. Thomas Sutton, who recruited young enthusiastic anti-Communists to his blossoming organization. The LoJ soon launched the campaign against the Chicago left in close cooperation with the Red Squad staff. According to Donner, these “terrorist style raids” included “burglaries, bugging, harassment, threats, disruption of meetings.” They physically attacked Vietnam Anti-War peace rallies and assaulted organizers. The LoJ also targeted the socialist activists and bookstores of the Young Socialist Alliance and the Socialist Workers Party.

This collaboration between the Chicago Red Squad and the Legion of Justice went on for many years. If there was any threat of exposure or arrest for the LoJ members, the Chicago police intervened to make sure they were protected. The CPD also protected Nazis when they marched in Marquette Park in 1978. Today, the CPD protects far right militia types when they menace anti-racists protesters recently in Chicago. President Donald Trump is popular with the cops judging from the wards that voted him in 2016. The head of the police union, John Catanzara, is a Trump favorite.

If the recent events in Bridgeport tell anything, it is that this collaboration between the CPD and the far right continues. If Black parents and their children can march against racism and police brutality in Mt. Greenwood—the most pro-cop neighborhood in Chicago, and the only ward that gave Trump a majority vote in 2016—then we can march in Bridgeport as well. The ghosts of the Hamburgs need to be exercised from Bridgeport, once and for all.

—

Joe Allen is the author of *The Package King: A Rank and File History of United Parcel Service, People Wasn’t Made to Burn: A True Story of Housing, Race, and Murder in Chicago*, and *Vietnam: The Last War the US Lost*